

METRO

Diver has blast with historic discovery

By Rich Calder

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SEA SHELLS: Gene Ritter (pictured) holds an empty shell that may have sunk in a 1954 mishap off Brooklyn involving the US aircraft carrier Bennington.
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Here's a bombshell of a discovery.

Brooklyn commercial divers believe they've uncovered what the Navy missed more than 50 years ago during a frantic search that made national headlines: roughly 1,500 live shells that went overboard into the Narrows and Gravesend Bay.

The Post joined the four-person crew last week searching for artifacts in the murky waters off the former Fort Lafayette — an island near Bay Ridge destroyed in 1960 to pave the way for the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge.

VIDEO: EXPLOSIVE DISCOVERY

Initially, the team planned to photograph a few small shells they found last year. But this time around, diver Gene Ritter was blown away by what he saw on the sea floor.

Scattered under only 20 feet of water were eight World War II-era copper artillery shells — including one five feet long — designed to shoot down airplanes, and about 1,500 large-caliber machine-gun shells designed to explode on contact.

"What a find!" shouted Ritter as he climbed aboard the vessel. "They're all over the place. Hundreds of them."

Ritter and munitions experts believe the ammo came from the stockpile of 14,470 live rounds that splashed into the bay during a military accident on March 4, 1954.

The aircraft carrier USS Bennington, moored off the fort, had unloaded the firepower onto a barge tied to its side. But the barge broke free during a violent storm, overturned and drifted six miles to the Rockaways — littering the muddy floor of the Narrows and Gravesend Bay with live ammo along the way.

"Unless there was an undocumented accident in the bay, what we found has to be from the Bennington," Ritter said.

Experts said if the ammunition is live, it could be dangerous to anyone who tries to move it — or to any ship that goes off course into shallow waters and scrapes the sea floor.

The discovery raises serious safety concerns about whether the city should move forward with plans to dredge in Gravesend Bay off Bensonhurst — a mile south of the Bennington accident site — to build a waste-transfer station, said Assemblyman William Colton (D-Brooklyn).

Colton said if heavy machinery used to remove sediment from the bay's floor disturbs the bombs "it could be a catastrophe" considering "there's an oil depot nearby."

Dredging could also loosen the shells from their resting place at the muddy bottom. Because they are encased in air-filled canisters, they could surface and drift to nearby beaches and shipping lanes.

The city's Sanitation Department declined comment.

The Navy, meanwhile, has disavowed knowledge of the shells' origins — or responsibility for removing them. A spokesman said the divers should call local authorities.

In a February 2008 letter to then-Rep. Vito Fossella obtained by The Post, then-Assistant Secretary of the Navy B.J. Penn claimed "all but 10" of the Bennington's munitions were eventually recovered by divers.

He said no records exist regarding other lost munitions in the bay but "it can not be concluded that such losses did not occur" considering the bay served as an explosives anchorage for vessels since the 1800s.

However, newspaper reports ten months after the Bennington mishap indicate the Navy divers were having a hard time finding the lost shells — and that nearly 14,000 were still missing.

Ritter contacted authorities yesterday and offered to help recover the missing munitions, but the underwater history buff hopes they'll let his team "continue exploring this incredible site."

Ritter's team, Cultural Research Divers, became celebrities in 2009 after The Post reported they recovered a historic brass bell from Coney Island's old Dreamland Park, which sank to the ocean floor during an infamous 1911 fire.